CAN THERE BE A NOBLE LIE?
MCC PHILOSOPHY CLUB
October 20th, 2026

Introduction: Today we will define what a lie is, and then examine whether there can be such a thing as a Noble Lie. Plato was the first philosopher to propose that it would be of benefit to his Ideal State that he lays out in his dialogue, *Republic*. We will begin with Plato's argument for a Noble Lie and its details, and then argue that it is and is not noble/ethical for the rulers to lie in that way. Next, we will discuss other situations which might be a Noble Lie and be ethical. As always, then we'll see what you think!

I. What is a Lie? A lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else will be led to believe it. So if I state that I heard that Person P died, and I'm wrong, that is not a lie unless I know P is alive. If I am trying to convince someone else that P died but know P is alive, then that is a lie.

II. Plato's Noble Lie (the passages):

A. The setup: First, Plato has the character Socrates ask, "How, then, could we devise one of those useful falsehoods we were talking about a while ago, one noble falsehood that would, in the best case, persuade even the rulers, but if that's not possible, then the others in the city?"[1]

B. The story or "myth of the metals": "All of you in the city are brothers," we'll say to them in telling our story, "but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule [the guardians], because they are most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries [soldiers] and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen. For the most part, you will produce children like yourselves, but, because you are all related, a silver child will occasionally be born from a golden parent, and vice versa, and all the others from each other. So the first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation. If an offspring of theirs should be found to have a mixture of iron or bronze, they must not pity him in any way, but give him the rank appropriate to his nature and drive him out to join the craftsmen and farmers. But if an offspring of these people is found to have a mixture of gold or silver, they will honor him and take him up to join the guardians or the auxiliaries, for there is an oracle which says that the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or bronze guardian."[2]

C. The myth of the metals applied to guardians/rulers and soldiers: "We'll tell them that they always have gold and silver of a divine sort in their souls as a gift from the gods and so have no further need of human gold. Indeed, we'll tell them that it's impious for them to defile this divine possession by any admixture of such gold, because impious deeds have been done that involve the currency used by ordinary people, while their own is pure. Hence, for them alone among the city's population, it is unlawful to touch or handle gold or silver."[3]

II. Is Plato's Noble Lie Noble (Ethical)?

A. Yes, it is Noble:

1. **Plato essentially believes that the point of the story is true:** Without giving a reference to every claim that will be made in this paragraph about Plato's view, Plato believes that there are three kinds of people: People who love money and pleasure, people who love honor, and people who love wisdom, contemplating, and doing philosophy. He states that the first group of people would best be the craftspersons and farmers, the second group of people should be soldiers, and the third group should be philosopher kings/rulers. So his claim that there are three metals in three kinds of people, though not *literally* true, is something he really believes, because he believes that people are naturally born into one of those three categories. Moreover, after the quotation in I.C above (the myth of the metals applied to the guardians and soldiers), Plato argues that if guardians and soldiers had money and property, they could be corrupted, bribed, etc., so he gave a practical and ethical reason why they should not have money or property as well. He wasn't just telling a myth that he thought was a lie. [One could argue that Plato lied when he referred to the Noble Lie as a lie! :)]

[1] *Republic* III 414b7-c2.
[2] *Republic* III 415a1-c5craftsmen.
[3] *Republic* III 416e4-417a3.

2. **Plato also believes that the rulers and soldiers should not have money** (or private property or wives, though they *should* reproduce, so sex would be arranged), and this is detailed further in his dialogue *Laws*. If the Noble Lie were really a lie, Plato should not have mentioned any of these points in any other places in the dialogues.
3. **Utilitarianism would say that the Noble Lie is ethical if it maximizes happiness for the population**. Utilitarians believe in general that the end (goal) justifies the means. So if we can figure out if that lie would really create a lot of happiness, then it would be good.
4. **American Pragmatists would say that something considered a lie which is useful, functional, and good in the way of belief is in fact not a lie, but truth.** So the ruler should be able to lie if the lie satisfies those conditions.

B. No, it is not Noble:

1. **Lying is Unethical, Period:** One can argue, as German philosopher Immanuel Kant would, that no one, let alone a ruler, should ever lie, no matter how beneficial the consequences, because the ruler cannot universalize the maxim that one can lie as a universal moral law, and the ruler would be using his/her subjects only as a means to get what he/she wanted, and would not be respecting the citizens as rational beings. Another argument Kant would make is that even well-intentioned lies (meant to help or protect others) can damage relationships or backfire if discovered and break people's trust, which is why honesty remains the standard choice in close, stable relationships.
2. **Undermines Trust of Country/State:** Building a society, or founding a society on a lie, is a fundamental deception that risks causing unrest, or even collapse, if the public were to discover the truth. It also sets a precedent that the government has the right to manipulate the truth and deceive its citizens for their own good, which could cause further political unrest in the future. Karl Popper critiqued Plato's concept of the Noble Lie, arguing that it is a slippery slope for totalitarianism and state propaganda.

III. Other Kinds of Possibly Noble Lies:

A. Lying to a friend not in their right mind (Plato): "If one took over weapons from a friend who was in his right mind and then the lender should go mad and demand them back, that we ought not to return them in that case and that he who did so return them would not be acting justly--nor yet would he who chose to speak nothing but the truth to one who was in that state.**"**[4] Note: In all of the cases where there is an option to lie, if one avoids/evades the question, that is known as a lie by omission, and is or can still be considered a lie. For example, if you said to your friend who wanted his weapon back, "It's a beautiful day, want to take a walk?" or "Have you seen this funny video?" and showed them that instead of answering their question, that is a lie by omission.

B. Lying to Nazis about Hiding Jews in WWII Germany: Almost everyone agrees that a houseowner should hide the Jews to help them out, and lie to the Nazis if they came to the door and asked if you were hiding Jews in your house. (Kant would be an exception - see II.B above.)

C. Lying to a Person with Dementia (A "therapeutic lie" - see list in Bonus Stuff, section II): If a person has an advanced case of dementia, their spouse has passed, they ask every half hour or so where their spouse is, and when told that their spouse has died, they absolutely sob and are inconsolable, but after about 10 minutes, forgets why they are crying. In such a case, one can argue that a caregiver should tell the person with dementia that their spouse had a doctor's appointment or went to the store, etc.

D. Preventing emotional shock: It is arguably moral to delay devastating news, such as a patient who was just in a car accident in the ICU asks if their spouse is still alive, and you're the doctor and know that their spouse has died. Lying to the patient saying you don't know about their spouse's status could be deemed necessary in order to not have the patient be put over the edge or to be able to focus on the patient until the patient is stable, and then tell them that their spouse is unfortunately dead.

E. Lying to a young child about their health status: A four-year old asks a nurse or doctor if he/she is going to die. One can argue that the health care professional should not tell the child the truth.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have any questions about anything we presented today?

[4] *Republic* I 331c-331d.

2. Do you think that Plato's Noble Lie is ethical or unethical, in the end, given the arguments on both sides? Which argument(s) convince you the most? The least?
3. Do you agree that any of the other kinds of Noble Lies are noble, or are you on Kant's side, that no one should ever lie, period, no matter how positive or beneficial the consequences might be?

BONUS STUFF

I. **Plato argued that lying is acceptable in certain circumstances, Part II:**
   A. **Plato states, "** But what of the falsehood in words--when and for whom is it serviceable so as not to merit abhorrence? Will it not be against enemies? And when any of those whom we call friends owing to madness or folly attempts to do some wrong, does it not then become useful to avert the evil--as a medicine? And also in the fables of which we were just now speaking, owing to our ignorance of the truth about antiquity, we liken the false to the true as far as we may and so make it edifying" (*Republic* II 382c-d).

II. **Types of Lies:**[5]
   A. **A *barefaced, bald-faced* or *bold-faced lie*** is an impudent, brazen, shameless, flagrant, or audacious lie that is sometimes but not always undisguised. Even if undisguised, it is not always obvious to those hearing it.
   B. A ***big lie*** is one that attempts to trick the victim into believing something major, which will likely be contradicted by some information the victim already possesses, or by their common sense. When the lie is of sufficient magnitude it may succeed, due to the victim's reluctance to believe that an untruth on such a grand scale would indeed be concocted.
   C. A ***black lie*** is told to harm someone else; it is "spiteful" when it harms the liar but "selfish" when it benefits them.
   D. A ***blue lie*** is a form of lying that is told purportedly to benefit a collective or "in the name of the collective good". The term "blue lie" possibly comes from cases where police officers made false statements to protect the police force or ensure the success of a legal case against an accused.
   E. An ***April fool*** is a lie or hoax told or performed on April Fools' Day.
   F. To ***bluff*** is to pretend to have a capability or intention one does not possess.
   G. ***Bullshit* (also *B.S.*, *bullcrap*, *bull*)** does not necessarily have to be a complete fabrication. While a lie is related by a speaker who believes what is said is false, bullshit is offered by a speaker who does not care whether what is said is true because the speaker is more concerned with giving the hearer some impression. Thus, bullshit may be either true or false, but demonstrates a lack of concern for the truth that is likely to lead to falsehoods.
   H. A ***cover-up*** is used to deny, defend, or obfuscate previously made lies, errors or misdeeds.
   I. *Defamation* is the communication of a false statement that harms the reputation of an individual person, business, product, group, government, religion, or nation.
   J. To ***deflect*** is to avoid the subject that the lie is about, not giving attention to the lie. When attention is given to the subject the lie is based around, deflectors ignore or refuse to respond. Skillful deflectors are passive-aggressive, who when confronted with the subject choose to ignore and not respond.
   K. ***Disinformation*** is intentionally false or misleading information that is spread in a calculated way to deceive target audiences.
   L. An ***exaggeration*** occurs when the most fundamental aspects of a statement are true, but only to a certain degree. It also is seen as "stretching the truth" or making something appear more powerful, meaningful, or real than it is. Saying that someone devoured most of something when they only ate half is considered an exaggeration. An exaggeration might be easily found to be a hyperbole where a person's statement (i.e. in informal speech, such as "He did this one million times already!") is meant not to be understood literally.
   M. ***Fake news*** is supposed to be a type of yellow journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional print and broadcast news media or online social media. Sometimes the term is applied as a deceptive device to deflect attention from uncomfortable truths and facts.
   N. A ***fib*** is a lie that is easy to forgive due to its subject being a trivial matter; for example, a child may tell a fib by claiming that the family dog broke a household vase, when the child was the one who broke it.
   O. ***Fraud*** refers to the act of inducing another person or people to believe a lie in order to secure material or financial gain for the liar. Depending on the context, fraud may subject the liar to civil or criminal penalties.
   P. A ***half-truth* or *partial truth*** is a deceptive statement that includes some element of truth. The statement might be partly true, the statement may be totally true, but only part of the whole truth, or it

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lie

may employ some deceptive element, such as improper punctuation or double meaning, especially if the intent is to deceive, evade, blame, or misrepresent the truth.[18] Partial truths are characterized by malicious intent, and therefore, honest people should not excuse them as containing a "rational kernel."

Q. ***Confabulation*** is fabricated information given because the speaker misremembers or has false memories. It is technically not a lie, since the "liar" neither knows he is incorrect nor intends to deceive others.

R. ***Jocose lies*** are lies meant in jest, intended to be understood as such by all present parties. Teasing and irony are examples. A more elaborate instance is seen in some storytelling traditions, where the storyteller's insistence that the story is the absolute truth, despite all evidence to the contrary (i.e., tall tale), is considered humorous. There is debate about whether these are "real" lies, and different philosophers hold different views. The Crick Crack Club in London arranges a yearly "Grand Lying Contest" with the winner being awarded the coveted "Hodja Cup" (named for the Mulla Nasreddin: "The truth is something I have never spoken."). The winner in 2010 was Hugh Lupton. In the United States, the Burlington Liars' Club awards an annual title to the "World Champion Liar."

S. ***Lie-to-children*** is a phrase that describes a simplified explanation of technical or complex subjects as a teaching method for children and laypeople. While lies-to-children are useful in teaching complex subjects to people who are new to the concepts discussed, they can promote the creation of misconceptions among the people who listen to them. The phrase has been incorporated by academics within the fields of biology, evolution, bioinformatics, and the social sciences. Media use of the term has extended to publications including *The Conversation* and *Forbes*.

T. ***Lying by omission***, also known as a *continuing misrepresentation* or *quote mining*, occurs when an important fact is left out in order to foster a misconception. Lying by omission includes the failure to correct pre-existing misconceptions. For example, when the seller of a car declares it has been serviced regularly, but does not mention that a fault was reported during the last service, the seller lies by omission. It may be compared to dissimulation. An omission is when a person tells most of the truth, but leaves out a few key facts that therefore, completely obscures the truth.

U. ***Lying in trade*** occurs when the seller of a product or service may advertise untrue facts about the product or service in order to gain sales, especially by competitive advantage. Many countries and states have enacted consumer protection laws intended to combat such fraud.

V. A ***memory hole*** is a mechanism for the alteration or disappearance of inconvenient or embarrassing documents, photographs, transcripts, or other records, such as from a website or other archive, particularly as part of an attempt to give the impression that something never happened.

W. ***Mutual deceit*** is a situation wherein lying is both accepted and expected or that the parties mutually accept the deceit in question. This can be demonstrated in the case of a poker game wherein the strategies rely on deception and bluffing to win.

X. A ***noble lie***, which also could be called a strategic untruth, is one that normally would cause discord if uncovered, but offers some benefit to the liar and assists in an orderly society, therefore, potentially being beneficial to others. It is often told to maintain law, order, and safety.

Y. ***Paltering*** is the active use of selective truthful statements to mislead.

Z. ***Paternalistic deception*** is a lie told because it is believed (possibly incorrectly) that the deceived person will benefit.

AA. In psychiatry, ***pathological lying*** (also called **compulsive lying, pseudologia fantastica, and mythomania**) is a behavior of habitual or compulsive lying. It was first described in the medical literature in 1891 by Anton Delbrueck. Although it is a controversial topic, pathological lying has been defined as "falsification entirely disproportionate to any discernible end in view, may be extensive and very complicated, and may manifest over a period of years or even a lifetime". The individual may be aware they are lying, or may believe they are telling the truth, being unaware that they are relating fantasies.

BB. ***Perjury*** is the act of lying or making verifiably false statements on a material matter under oath or affirmation in court, or in any of various sworn statements in writing. Perjury is a crime, because the witness has sworn to tell the truth, and for the credibility of the court to remain intact, witness testimony must be relied on as truthful.

CC. A ***polite lie*** is a lie that a politeness standard requires, and that usually is known to be untrue by both parties. Whether such lies are acceptable is heavily dependent on culture. A common polite lie in international etiquette may be to decline invitations because of "scheduling difficulties", or due to "diplomatic illness". Similarly, the butler lie is a small lie that usually is sent electronically and is used to terminate conversations or to save face.

DD. ***Puffery*** is an exaggerated claim typically found in advertising and publicity announcements, such as "the highest quality at the lowest price", or "always votes in the best interest of all the people". Such statements are unlikely to be true – but cannot be proven false and so, do not violate trade laws, especially as the consumer is expected to be able to determine that it is not the absolute truth.

EE. The phrase "***speaking with a forked tongue***" means to deliberately say one thing and mean another or, to be hypocritical, or act in a duplicitous manner. This phrase was adopted by Americans around the time of the Revolution, and may be found in abundant references from the early nineteenth century – often reporting on American officers who sought to convince the Indigenous peoples of the Americas with whom they negotiated that they "spoke with a straight and not with a forked tongue" (as for example, President Andrew Jackson told members of the Creek Nation in 1829). According to one 1859 account, the proverb that the "white man spoke with a forked tongue" originated in the 1690s, in the descriptions by the indigenous peoples of French colonials in America inviting members of the Iroquois Confederacy to attend a peace conference, but when the Iroquois arrived, the French had set an ambush and proceeded to slaughter and capture the Iroquois.

FF. A ***therapeutic fib*** is lying, or bending the truth, in order to avoid increased agitation from a person with dementia. The intent is not to deceive the patient, but rather to help them feel safe and secure in facing an otherwise upsetting situation or fact.

GG. ***Weasel word*** is an informal term for words and phrases aimed at creating an impression that a specific or meaningful statement has been made, when in fact only a vague or ambiguous claim has been communicated, enabling the specific meaning to be denied if the statement is challenged. A more formal term is equivocation.

HH. A ***white lie*** is a harmless or trivial lie, especially one told in order to be polite or to avoid hurting someone's feelings or stopping them from being upset by the truth. A white lie also is considered a lie to be used for greater good (pro-social behavior). It sometimes is used to shield someone from a hurtful or emotionally-damaging truth, especially when not knowing the truth is deemed by the liar as completely harmless. However, white lies can still be harmful as they can foster distrust when used in inappropriate situations.